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ABSTRACT

The state of Minnesota has established the Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium (MECC) to coordinate the state's educational computing activities. The Consortium is governed by a board of directors representing the State Department of Education, the State Junior Colleges, the State Colleges, the State University and the public and is designed to respond to user needs as defined by these member systems. MECC receives funding for communication facilities from the state, while support for services comes from the member systems using those services; accountability to the state government and the public is maintained through biennial reports. The Consortium's responsibilities include: 1) the coordination and consolidation of the computing budgets of the member systems; 2) the provision of computer services related to development of educational computing; 3) the offering of fiscal management services; 4) the owing, leasing and operation of computer systems; and 5) the development of long-range computing plans. It is anticipated that MECC will result in the provision of better services and access to computers for educators, students, and the public and that it will promote better communication about computing needs between educational systems and the state government. (PB)

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MINNESOTA EDUCATIONAL COMPUTING CONSORTIUM

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INTRODUCTION

Because of the increased utilization of computers at each level of education in Minnesota, many state educational leaders have recognized the need to plan and coordinate educational computing activities. Although initial planning efforts have been primarily within the individual systems and institutions of education, during the past three years there have been a number of significant joint planning activities.

In late 1971, Commissioner of Education Howard Casmey established a task force to begin work on a comprehensive plan for computer services required by elementary, secondary, and vocational schools in the state. An ad hoc committee called together by the Commissioner of Administration agreed that a statewide plan for all of educational computing should be undertaken. A Planning Task Force was appointed in May, 1972. In July, 1972, Governor Anderson transformed the ad hoc committee into the Governor's Joint Committee on Computers In Education. A preliminary draft of the Planning Task Force Report was presented to, and reviewed by, this committee on September 5, 1972. It was approved for distribution to the member systems for review by them.

On October 20, 1972, the Governor's Joint Committee reviewed the reactions from the individual systems. These were presented in writing to the committee. The committee agreed that the task force should prepare a revised draft of the report; also that the task force should be expanded to include more systems representatives. At its meeting of November 22, 1972, the Joint Committee endorsed the plan and recommended that the report contain specific information regarding funding needs for 1973-75. In his budget message to the 1973 Legislature, Governor Anderson endorsed the plan and recommended a $3.6 million budget for its implementation.

PROPOSED ORGANIZATION

The Planning Task Force prepared a "joint powers" approach, establishing a consortium of public educational systems - the Minnesota Educational Computing Consortium (MECC). Each member system will delegate powers and responsibiiities to the consortium. MECC will be governed by the educational systems through a board of directors representing the State Department of Education, the State Junior Colleges, the State Colleges, the University and the public. The advisory structure will also be "user-oriented" both as to method of selection of members and as to function.

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The primary emphasis of MECC is to respond to the computing needs as defined by the educational systems and to provide facilities and services on a real cost basis and at uniform rates. The economies of scale provided by large efficient computer systems makes it possible to provide existing services at equal or less cost than presently and to greatly expand the quantity and quality of services available at all education institutions while holding the unit costs of these services at the lowest possible level. Through joint use of a single communications work, it will be possible also to achieve economies in communications costs.

Responsibilities to be delegated to MECC include the following:

1) Review, coordinate and consolidate proposed biennial computing budgets of the individual member systems.

2) Provide computing services related to the development of educational computing for the member systems including: the review and approval of the acquisition of general purpose computing equipment and systems; establishment of technical standards, including communications; engineering and maintenance of computer facilities; training and consultation services; software development and maintenance.

3) Provide fiscal management of computers on behalf of individual systems of education.

4) Own, lease and operate computer systems. In general, the responsibility by MECC to operate computer systems will apply to all new systems; that is, to those which are acquired after MECC is established. For existing computer systems, a member system may agree to delegate to MECC the operation of these computer systems, including the ownership or leasing of the equipment thereof; the member could also continue to operate the computer system, under a contract with MECC.

5) Develop long-range plans for computer system hardware, software and services, and for the continued monitoring, modification, and updating of those plans in accordance with changes in technology and in the needs of member systems.

PRINCIPLES OF ORGANIZATION AND OPERATION

There are a number of basic principles of organization and operation which, in essence, represent a "constitutional basis" for the joint powers agreement. Among the principles are the following:

1) The funding of services provided by MECC shall be through the member systems which use the services.

2) The funding of communications facilities shall be through a direct state appropriation of funds for that purpose.

3) The policy direction and governance of the consortium will be under the control of the users.

4) The needs for services will be defined by the users through the member systems.

5) Accountability to state government and to the public will be maintained through biennial reports to the Government and Legislature through the HECC, the State Board of Education, and State Information Systems Advisory Committee and by means of the three directors appointed by the Government and Legislature.

6) The consortium must be organized and function so as to maintain and increase the overall computing competence of the educational institutions and systems.

7) The specific instructional, research, and administrative needs will be defined by the systems and must be accommodated by the consortium.

8) The administrative overhead associated with the consortium should be as limited as possible, consistent with needs for effective planning and careful management of limited resources.

9) In general, the service responsibilities to be exercised by MECC will be limited to general-purpose computing.

10) No educational user of computer services and/or facilities shall receive, as a result of joining the proposed consortium, less service or less adequate service than needed and previously available through institutional and system resources.

SPECIFIC PURPOSES OF THE CONSORTIUM

The specific purposes of MECC in serving the member systems are as follows:

- To ensure effective access to computing facilities to students and faculty for both research and instruction.
- To provide effective management information services (MIS).
- To assist systems of education and coordinating agencies in providing meaningful information to governing boards and to the executive legislative branches of government to assist them in formulating effective educational policies.
- To ensure effective access to computing services for purposes of public service.

SUMMARY OF SERVICES TO BE PROVIDED

It is proposed that the MECC staff through its advisory structure be responsible for planning, coordination and review of budgets with regard to all educational computing activity. This coordination and planning responsibility would begin as soon as the organization is established.

It is recommended that the following services be provided by MECC at some point in time:

- Instructional Timesharing Services should be coordinated into a single network (but not necessarily a single computer system) for all levels of education.

- Instructional Batch Processing Services should be provided on a large computer system now in existence at the University of Minnesota and Mankato State College.
- Research Computing Services should be provided in either the timeshared or batch processing mode.
- Management Information Systems should be provided for institutions of higher education by combining existing systems at the University, State Colleges and the Junior Colleges; and by six regional data processing centers located throughout the state to serve elementary, secondary and vocational schools.
- Occupational Training Services should be provided through satellite computers interfaced with large batch processing centers.